

Jihad

Scope of this paper

Jihad is frequently misunderstood in the West. There are three cultural factors that contribute to a misunderstanding by the West and U.S. citizens in particular:

- First, the West is not intimately familiar with the Islamic religion and its traditions. Sometimes a 'little knowledge' is not a good thing. In the case of *jihad* a 'little knowledge' frequently leads to fear, mistrust and stereotyping of Muslims and/or Arab people.
- Secondly, the media focuses on the most extreme Islamic groups, many of whom use the term *jihad* for personal or political goals that have little relationship to the larger Islamic community.
- Third, *jihad* is not a static concept. It is part of a living religious tradition and as such it is constantly growing, changing and adapting as Islam seeks to speak meaningfully to people living in the post-modern world.

The purpose of this paper is to expose the reader to the dynamic nature of *jihad* as it has been experienced and interpreted throughout Islamic history. Emphasis will be placed on contemporary interpretations of this important and evolving Islamic concept.

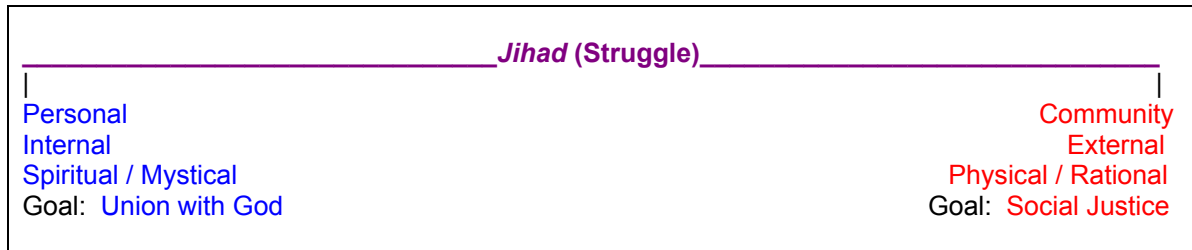
Because the concept of *jihad* is so extensive in Islam the scope of *jihad* in this paper has to be limited. The focus here will be on the *Sunni* expression with only a passing reference to the *Shia* and *Sufi* adaptations. Also, this paper is limited to what Islamic scholars call the 'lesser' *jihad*. It should be noted that the 'greater' *jihad* is of far greater significance to the vast majority of the 1.3 billion people who make up the Muslim community. However, given the current world situation, it is the 'lesser' *jihad* or the crude term, 'holy war' that is of greater concern for U.S. military personal and therefore the focus of this paper.

Another feature of this paper is the use of the Christian faith as a point of reference in the discussion of Islamic *jihad*. The Christian religious tradition is my personal frame of reference and one that is shared by a large percentage of American readers. Great care has been taken; however, not to alienate those who do not share in this tradition. It is my hope that they will be able to easily follow the line of reasoning and understand the concepts that are presented throughout this paper.

Definition

The word *jihad* is derived from the Arabic root meaning 'to strive or struggle' or 'to make an effort' in the way of God. The word implies much more than 'holy war.' Indeed, there are numerous Arabic words that speak of armed combat, *harb* (war), *sira'a* (combat), *ma'araka* (battle) or *qital* (killing) to name just a few. The Quran bypasses these terms and chose instead the word *jihad* because of its many nuances and the wide range of meanings that can be derived from it.

At one end of the spectrum *jihad* is a word that speaks of the personal inward spiritual (i.e. mystical) struggle (*jihad*) that every Muslim must undertake in their life-long journey to surrender completely to God. At the other end of the spectrum is Islam as a community that struggles (*jihad*) to embody a just society where minorities, the weak, poor, and the most vulnerable are protected, valued and cared for. On a chart the wide range of meaning that the term *jihad* has would look like this:



These two concepts of *jihad* are not mutually exclusive; indeed, each end of the spectrum depends upon the other for its fulfillment.

It was the *Sufis* (Muslim mystics) who popularized the tradition of describing the personal, spiritual struggle as the 'greater' *jihad* and the communal, external struggle as the 'lesser' *jihad*.

There is a well-known Islamic tradition that states that when the prophet was returning from an armed struggle he said to his fellow Muslims, "We are returning from the lesser *jihad* to the greater *jihad*." That is, it will be harder to live in peace and work for justice then it was to be victorious in war. Modern experiences have reinforced the truth of these words. In 1947 Pakistan won the right to self-government at the cost of a million lives but the greater *jihad* has been fought in the last fifty years as the nation struggles to create a just Islamic society. In 1979 Iran won its freedom from the Shah and the West but the creation of a new and just Islamic society is still being tested and hammered out. In 1989 the Afghan freedom fighters drove out the communist invaders but the job of establishing a just society has proven to be much more difficult.

Karen Armstrong aptly states,

"It was and remains a duty for Muslims to commit themselves to a struggle on all fronts – moral, spiritual and political – to create a just and decent society, where the poor and vulnerable are not exploited, in the way that God had intended man to live. Fighting and warfare might sometimes be necessary, but it was only a minor part of the whole *jihad* or struggle."ⁱ

While it is important to note that the term '*jihad*' covers a large spectrum, the focus on this paper, as mentioned earlier, is on the evolution and current understandings of the 'lesser' *jihad*.

Church and State

Americans, even non-religious Americans, take seriously the issue of the separation of church and state. There is no such concept in Islam. The 'one God' informs and guides both the religious and the political sphere. If we look back at Western history we discover that the separation of Church and state was not a forgone conclusion but this idea was hammered out over centuries of strife. It is unlikely that Islam's struggle will follow the same course because the Christian and Muslim traditions have had very different histories and to a large degree it is the past that sets the course for the future.

Christianity. Christianity came to birth in the Roman Empire. A vast empire governed by a rule of law. Often referred to as the '*pax Romana*' this legal system created a certain sense of peace and social security to those who lived under its rule. When Jesus entered the world, he preached a gospel of peace to a world that knew relative peace. To a people who knew law, both in the Jewish religious sense and in the Roman political sense, he preached grace. The Jews of Jesus' day despised the Romans and distanced themselves from the Roman political world. But while they disliked the Roman yoke, they recognized that it was Roman law that guaranteed a civilized environment, even in Palestine. Even a cursory reading of the gospels will show that the Jewish leaders would not put Jesus to death without satisfying the requirements of the Roman law.

Given the stable backdrop of a civilization governed by law the early Christians could reject 'the world' and often refused military service. The Roman rule of law was established long before the birth of Jesus and continued long after his earthly life. Because a political order was already firmly established Jesus' message was centered on spiritual issues, not political ones. In the Christian tradition, therefore, there is a tendency by many to view political activity as something that is often external to the Christian life.

Islam. Muhammad was born under very different circumstances. Seventh-century Arabia was awash in blood and outside of the civilized world. Its political and social order was disintegrating at an alarming rate and there was no rule of law to fill in the gap. The old tribal values were being ignored and the poor were being exploited by a newly created merchant class. Into this arena Muhammad became a voice for the poor. At first he insisted his message was one of social justice...an echo of the Hebrew prophets of old. But, as events unfolded he found that he could not proclaim a new religious message without also creating a new political reality. His vision ultimately created not only a new religion but also a new society...indeed, a new civilization.

Muhammad, like the apostle Paul in Christianity, was a 'task theologian,' that is, he addressed pressing issues as they presented themselves to him. He did not start with a grand scheme but only short pointed revelations that gradually drew him into a violent and chaotic political world. In the course of his life, his religious witness became more and more political. He would later discover that sometimes violence was inevitable. *Jihad* is a concept that grew out of a religious vision that could not separate itself from political application. In Muhammad's later revelations and his sayings (*hadiths*) we find evolving the beginnings of an Islamic just war theology.

Jihad in Classical Islam

During the time Muhammad was receiving revelation while in Mecca (610-622 AD) *jihad* had the meaning of a non-violent struggle to spread Islam. In 622 AD his life was in danger in Mecca and he was forced to flee to Medina. This flight, known as the *hijra*, marks the beginning of a five year period where not only the life of Muhammad but the survival of the Muslim community was in mortal danger. It was during this time that Muhammad received the revelation that fighting in self-defense was sanctioned by God (Quran 22:39). From this point on the Quran began referring increasingly to *qital* (fighting or warfare) as one form of *jihad*.

Muhammad's biographers have put the number of battles that the prophet was involved in at more than 80, but a close reading indicates that he only engaged in war on three occasions; at Badr, Uhud and Hunayn. All the other accounts are references where Muhammad entered into negotiations with the result that conflicts were avoided. The three battles he was involved in were all in self-defense for the survival of the Muslim community and were engaged only when war had become inevitable. In keeping with Arabic tribal tradition each battle lasted only for half a day, beginning at noon and ending at sunset.ⁱⁱ

From Muhammad's revelations and other authoritative sources Islamic jurists would make plain the limits the prophet imposed upon military *jihad*:

Jihad should be declared only:

- In defense of the cause of God, not for conquest;
- To restore peace and freedom of worship;
- For freedom from tyranny;
- When led by a spiritual leader.
- It should only be fought until the enemy lays down arms.
- Women, children, and the old and sick, are not to be harmed, and trees and crops are not to be damaged.

Jihad does not include:

- wars of aggression or ambition;
- border disputes or either national or tribal squabbles;
- the intent to conquer and suppress, colonize, exploit, etc;
- forcing people into accepting a faith they do not believe.

The last two revelations that were given to Muhammad on the topic of *jihad* (Quran 9:5, 29) leave open the interpretation that Muslims could (should) declare war for the conquest or conversion of unbelievers. This paved the way for the medieval doctrine of *jihad* as 'holy war'.

Jihad in Medieval Times

Medieval jihad. After Muhammad's death the Arabs experienced extraordinary military success as Islamic law was established throughout North Africa and planted as far East as central Asia and parts of China. Motivated by military conquests, Islamic scholars began to define *jihad* as a divinely sanctioned struggle to establish Islam in non-Islamic areas. The limitations of warfare established by Muhammad were respected and clarified but the emphasis during this period was to use *jihad* as a doctrine to justify continued warfare not, as in Muhammad's day, a tool to define the moral limits of a war that was to be entered into very reluctantly. The Quranic verses which promote peaceful accommodation with non-believers (2:193, 861) were declared abrogated by the later, more militant verses. It was popularly believed that the Muslims were successful because their religion was just. A society reorganized according to God's will, they reasoned, cannot fail.

These wars of conquest were not to convert the conquered people to Islam but to establish Islamic law and order throughout the region. The Islamic religion was not forced upon the conquered people, in fact, Islam was seen as an exclusively Arab religion and for almost 100 years after Muhammad's death non-Arabs were forbidden to convert to Islam.

In medieval legal sources (compiled between the 8th and 11th centuries) Islamic legal scholars divided the world into two spheres:

1. *Dar al-Islam*, the house of Islam, where Islamic law was applied, and
2. *Dar al-Harb*, the house of war, where anarchy and immorality ran wild because of the lack of Islamic law.

The duty of the Muslim state was to promote civilization by reducing *Dar al-Harb* through peaceful means if possible, or through war if necessary. *Jihad* was accepted as the Islamic norm as jurists argued about the possibility and duration of peace between the two spheres. The majority held that a *jihad* could be suspended if it was in the best interest of the Islamic state, but if this peace lasted longer than ten years then Muslims were guilty of neglecting their sacred duty. By the 14th century this teaching was taken to extremes by such radicals as Ibn Taymiyya who declared, "*Jihad* against the disbelievers is the most noble of actions."ⁱⁱⁱ

The medieval understanding of expansionist *jihad* persisted until the Islamic community reached the limits of its expansion. At that point the concept of martial theology became marginalized and was laid aside as other cultural issues came to prominence. The Islamic world was changing direction as it began to settle down and cultivate a truly Islamic culture. The concept of *jihad* as an armed struggle against non-believers faded into the background and Muslims developed normal diplomatic and economic links with their neighbors in the 'house of war'. Other religious traditions were respected. In accordance with the Quran^{iv} in Muslim territories there was no

pressure on Jews, Christians or Zoroastrians to convert to Islam. Muslims, in the tradition of religious pluralism in the Middle East, learned to coexist with members of other religions.

Modern Interpretations of *Jihad*

There are four broad approaches to the modern world of the evolving concept of *jihad*. These are: the apologetic, the modernist, the revivalist, and the radical approaches.

Apologetic *jihad*. In the late 19th century Christian missionaries, in an effort to show Islam as a barbaric religion, began proclaiming that *jihad* meant 'holy war' and that Islam was a religion spread by the sword. The Muslim apologists, most of them educated in the West, argued convincingly that an armed *jihad* was only permissible in self-defense against persecution and aggression. Some writing from British India went even further to declare that a *jihad* could only be legitimate if there was a direct threat to Islamic worship and because no such threat existed in India, Muslims have no right to challenge British colonial rule. According to these scholars, the medieval theorists who were quoted by the Christian missionaries as promoting *jihad* as an expansionist war were misguided and misinterpreted the Quran and Islamic tradition. This tradition gradually gave way to the modernist perspective in the second half of the 20th century.

Modernist *jihad*. Like the apologists, modernists criticize the medieval theory of *jihad* as a distortion of the Quran. What makes the modernist approach to *jihad* distinctive is that they were not motivated by Western criticism of Islam. Instead, they desired to reclaim a meaningful Islamic term that had been hijacked by the West. The modernists point out that the division of the world into *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb* is not found in either the Quran or Prophetic traditions and is therefore a later innovation. A war, they argued, is only *jihad* if fought in defense of Muslim lives, property, and honor. The modernists diminish *jihad*'s military aspects (the 'lesser' *jihad*) and emphasize its broader ethical dimensions (the 'greater' *jihad*) within Islamic faith and practice. A military *jihad* they insisted is compatible with modern international norms for warfare. This school sees military *jihad* as the Islamic equivalent of the Christian 'just war' theory. That is, a war is only a *jihad* when fought to repel aggression with limited goals and by restricted means. This understanding of *jihad* is the position taken and supported by most Islamic governments today.

Revivalist *jihad*. Reclaiming the medieval concept of an aggressive Islamic *jihad*, the revivalists claim that the prophet's words and Islam history show that the meaning of *jihad* cannot be limited to self-defense. They argue that in the final years of the Prophet's life *jihad* clearly meant the struggle to propagate Islam worldwide. This is the view of *jihad* that has captured most of the Islamic Fundamentalist groups. It is diametrically opposed to the modernist view and frequently brings Islamic governments and Islamic Fundamentalist groups in direct confrontation with each other. The goal of revivalist *jihad* is to overthrow un-Islamic regimes that corrupt their societies and divert people from service to God. Because the practice of Islam is viewed very narrowly, un-Islamic regimes are in power in almost every Muslim country. Egypt and Saudi Arabia are particularly noted as being 'puppets' to Western, i.e. U.S., manipulation. The immediate goal of revivalist *jihad* is to overthrow and replace hypocritical leaders with true Muslims. It is only after a long and painstaking internal struggle has succeeded that an authentic Islamic base will be in place and the external *jihad* can resume.

Two scholars whose work is crucial in understanding both revivalist and radical *jihad* are Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903-79) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). Mawdudi was a Pakistani journalist and politician who published in Egypt. Having experienced the bloody struggle for a Muslim Pakistan in 1947, Mawdudi was convinced that Islam was in mortal danger and must begin fighting for its life. He demanded a universal *jihad*, which he declared to be the central tenet of Islam. No major Muslim thinker had ever made this claim before. *Jihad* was to be seen as a revolution. A struggle to seize power from the corrupt rulers for the good of all humanity. Now, for the first time in Islamic history, *jihad* took a central place in official Islamic discourse. The *Muslim Brotherhood*,

a group that came together in 1928 to foster Islamic education in Egypt, began to gravitate towards Mawdudi's views and became more militant as Nasser's government moved to become more and more secular.

Qutb was profoundly moved by Mawdudi's analysis of Islam. He joined the *Muslim Brotherhood* in 1953 and was imprisoned with a large number of *Muslim Brotherhood* members by Nasser in 1954. He was sentenced to fifteen years hard labor. It was in Nasser's prison camps that he became convinced that true Muslims and secularists could not live at peace in the same society. Known today as the founder of Sunni fundamentalism, Qutb was convinced that the secular world must be destroyed. He wrote:

Humanity today is living in a large brothel! One has only to glance at its press, films, fashion shows, beauty contests, ballrooms, wine bars, and broadcasting stations! Or observe its mad lust for naked flesh, provocative postures, and sick, suggestive statements in literature, the arts and the mass media!

He called for Muslims to revolt against this secular city and to restore a sense of the spiritual to modern society. Because the governments in Islamic countries are corrupt, the call to *jihad* was incumbent on true Muslims everywhere to rise up against injustice. Now, for the first time, we see *jihad* understood as an individual duty and not as a communal obligation. Fearing that the violent secularism of the Nasser regime was destroying Islam, Qutb espoused a form of Islam that was diametrically opposed to the Quran and the witness of the prophet. Qutb urged Muslims to separate themselves from mainstream society and engage in a violent *jihad*. When confronted by the Quranic witness that advocated non-violence, opposed force and coercion in religious matters, and demonstrated tolerance and inclusiveness, Qutb insisted that these Quranic injunctions to peace and toleration could only occur **after** the establishment of a true Islamic state. So radical was Qutb's call to arms that at Nasser's personal insistence he was executed in 1966. Far from silencing this radical movement, it served only to fan the flames of rage as Islamic Fundamentalism now had its first martyr.

In his book, *Islam: The Straight Path*, author John Esposito gives us six beliefs that undergird Islamic revivalism. They are:

1. Islam is a total way of life. Religion is integral to politics, law, and society.
2. Muslim societies fail because they depart from the straight path of Islam and follow a Western secular path that leads to materialism and non-Islamic values.
3. Muslims must return to Islam through an Islamic reformation or revolution that draws its inspiration from the Quran and the prophet Muhammad.
4. This renewal requires that Islamic law replace Western-inspired civil codes.
5. Western values and secularization is condemned but modernization is not. Science and technology are positive things, but they must be subordinated to Islamic beliefs and values.
6. This process of Islamization requires Muslims everywhere to struggle (*jihad*) against corruption and social injustice.^v

As extreme as revivalist *jihad* would become, it would be given an even more extreme expression by a small but radical faction of Islam.

Radical jihad. While revivalist Islam focus on secular Islamic governments, the extremists attack what they believe to be the root of the problem. From their perspective the secular Islamic governments are the creation of foreign influences forced upon the Islamic culture. The demonic influences of secularism, commercialism, political ideology (whether capitalism, Marxism or communism), colonialism and Western economic oppression of the Muslim world has diluted the strength of the Islamic witness and polluted the sacred Islamic vision of a just society. It is this

small disenfranchised group of Muslims that caused Samuel Huntington to state, "(They are) convinced of the superiority of their culture, and obsessed with the inferiority of their power."^{vi}

Like revivalist Islam, radical Islam shares the following perspectives:

- Jihad takes a central place in their theology
- Jihad does not require an Imam or governmental leader for legitimacy
- The tolerant injunctions found in the Quran and Islam are suspended because of the current emergency that threatens the survival of 'true' Islam.

What distinguishes radical Islam from revivalist Islam is:

- The belief that subtle, non-militaristic influences such as secularism, Western dress and media, etc. are a dire threat to the survival of Islam and constitute aggression or an act of war upon Islam.
- The belief that the current situation constitutes a desperate emergency that suspends all of the restrictions that *jihad* normally places upon warfare. The treatment of POW's, the injunction not to harm civilians, women, children and property, etc. are not valid in the current conflict; however, when Islam is restored to its rightful place in the world these restrictions will once again be restored.

Whereas revivalist Islam is about 'building up', radical Islam is about 'tearing down'. Revivalist Islam is interested in change for the purpose of establishing a truly Islamic government. Radical Islam is interested in ridding the world of the un-Islamic forces and influences. It is these forces that corrupt and prohibit a truly Islamic state from coming into existence.

When one compares the six beliefs of radical Islam with the six beliefs of revivalist Islam, one walks away with a better understanding of the black and white either/or mentality that guides the members of this group. The beliefs of radical Islam are:

1. A crusader mentality that pits the West against the Islamic world.
2. The establishment of an Islamic government is not an alternative but an Islamic imperative based on God's command.
3. Governments that do not follow the *sharia* (Islamic law) are illegitimate. They (governments and/or individuals) are guilty of unbelief. They are no longer considered Muslim but atheists and their unbelief demands *jihad* (holy war).
4. Opposition to illegitimate governments extends to the official *ulama*, the religious establishment, and state-supported mosques.
5. *Jihad* (holy war) against unbelievers is a religious duty. Total commitment and obedience is demanded. One is either a true believer or an infidel, saved or damned a friend or an enemy of God.
6. Christians and Jews are regarded as unbelievers rather than "People of the Book". There is a Judeo-Christian conspiracy against Islam and the Muslim world. Thus, Muslim minorities are often subjected to persecution.^{vii}

For the vast majority of Muslims, this understanding is a perverse and dangerous misguided understanding of a rich and important concept in Islam. But for a small troubled minority, the radical interpretation of *jihad* is a sacred obligation that requires their total allegiance. For those who embrace this understanding of *jihad* it becomes a bit clearer as to why they are ready to follow leaders like Osama Bin Laden (a Muslim with no formal religious training or governmental position) when he declares, "It is the duty of every Muslim to kill the Americans and their allies, civilians and the military."

Conclusion

Jihad in the Islamic tradition is not a static term with a specific set meaning. Through time its meaning and application have taken on various forms. Today there is a lot of dialogue taking place in the Islamic world around this term and its implication for faith and the future of Islam. Muslims are not in agreement on how this term is applied in the contemporary world. *Jihad* is dynamic; it continues to evolve in the context of the 21st century. President Bush is eager to stress that the current conflict, "is a war on terrorism, not on Islam." Osama Bin Laden is just as anxious to stress that this is a *jihad* (holy war), and Islam must be united against the U.S. aggressors. The Muslim world seems unwilling to strongly commit itself to either side. Perhaps this is because the Muslim world frames the situation differently. Perhaps the Muslim world is seeing this situation not as a holy war of Islam against the West but as a true *jihad*... **a struggle within Islam** to define itself. Can it be that the current situation is a *jihad* (struggle) within Islam to discover how the 'lesser' *jihad* can find a legitimate place in the life of a religious community that historically has stressed peace, social justice and tolerance of people of various ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds?

ⁱ Armstrong, Karen, *Muhammad: a Biography of the Prophet*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 168.

ⁱⁱ Khanam, Farida, "Understanding Jihad." 4 July 2000. (www.jammu-kashmir.com/insights/insights20000704a.html)

ⁱⁱⁱ "Enemies Within, Enemies Without" (The Economist, 9/22/01, Vol 360 Issue 8240, p20)

^{iv} "Let there be no compulsion in religion" Quran 2:256.

^v Esposito, John, *Islam: The Straight Path*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 166.

^{vi} Huntington, Samuel, *The Clash of Civilizations and the remaking of World Order*. (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 210.

^{vii} Esposito, John, *Islam: The Straight Path*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 167.